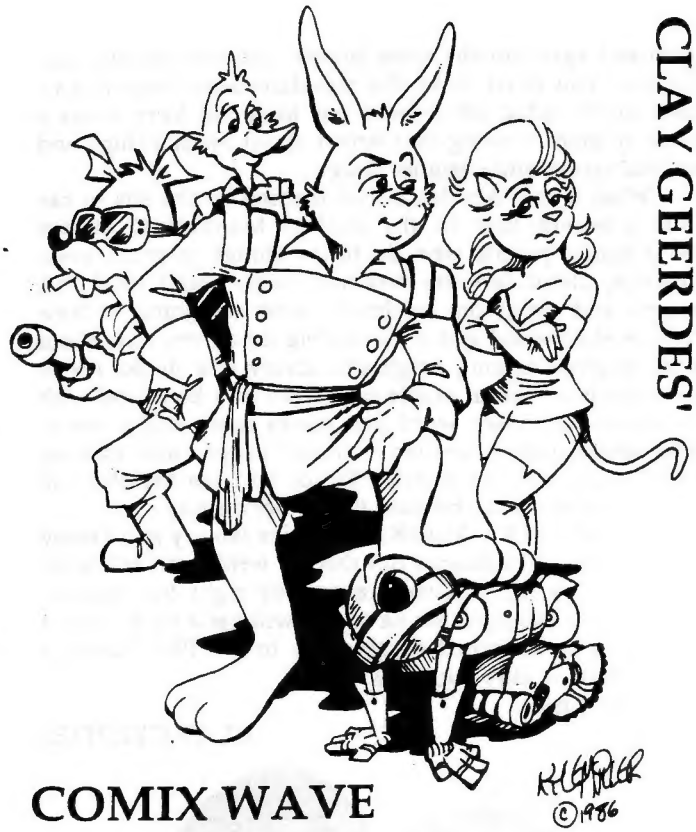

COMIX WAVE 64. July, 1988. ©Clay Geerdes, Box 7081, Berkeley, California 94707. All Rights Reserved. Membership is $7.50 a year. 12 issues of this newsletter are included.

THE WRITING FANTASY

I just bought a copy of that wish-fullfillment fantasy for writers, the **WRITER'S MARKET**. I love this book because it holds out such hope for the novice and so many laughs for the working freelancer. Thousands of magazines are listed and the newcomer, I'm sure, gets that glowing mixture of success and greed just reading through all those company comments. Some of these magazines buy nearly all of their material out of the mail! Astounding. Some pay almost as much now as they were paying back in 1910. No intelligent writer is going to do anything for 2 or 3 cents a word in 1988; indeed, the effort isn't worth it for less than a couple hundred; after all, these magazine sharks are now telling all of us to get professional and use word processors, but the average freelancer out here isn't making the kind of money needed to invest in a word processor with all of its programs and accessories. I feel sorry for the poor geniuses like Ernest Hemingway who had to type their stuff on old Smith-Corona standards. Or guys like Dickens who actually had to write everything out in longhand. Do you realize that Tolstoy wrote **WAR AND PEACE** in longhand? Ah, there was dedication in those days.

Well, let's drift behind the scenes and see what really happens in the publishing world. Let's sneak into the office of **SLOPPY HOUSEKEEPING** on a typical Monday morning. The new **WRITER'S MARKET** has just come out and there are eleven sacks of mail being dumped and sorted in the mail room. This mail is broken down into the usual departments and divisions. The unreadable addresses scribbled in pencil are put aside. The mangled manuscripts that have been torn open and spilled in the bottom of the sack are carefully removed and set aside. By mid-morning, part of the mail will reach the offices of various editors. Let's go into the office of the Articles Editor. It's about eleven now and she's back from her coffee break. Her head is clearing from the weekend cocktail parties and she confronts the mail. She may have several hundred or more envelopes on her blotter, all of them commanding her attention with rubber stamps like **IMPORTANT** and **PERSONAL,** but the mail on her desk consists only of those letters and manila envelopes *addressed to her personally*. The rest of the mail is still on the desk of an assistant or an assistant to that assistant, there being in the publishing world a hierarchy as complex and impenetrable as that of the Post Office itself. The Articles Editor begins to plow through the stack, separating names she knows from those she doesn't, contract authors from strangers, personal buddies from clients. If you sent your article to her by name, it may be in this stack or in one that will appear on her desk in the next month. If you simply sent it to the magazine, it may get to her within the year if you are lucky. If you specified that your piece was an article and not a story, not fiction, it might get to her eventually, but by the time it does you will have long forgotten about it. Or you will have sent several frustrating letters that have been dealt with by an assistant. The sight of the average slush pile would terrify most novice freelancers.

The Articles Editor goes through her personal mail first, just like you do at home. She laughs at the lively accounts of her children's petty problems as European exchange students, scowls at a terse businesslike note from a superior about something she forgot to do a week ago, makes some notes about an article that might work in the Summer Fashion Special, grimaces at the phraseology in an article by a writer who is a friend of the Associate Editor, someone *she* would reject out of hand, but has to accept and flatter because of the powers that be. And, lo and behold, it's lunchtime. She gets up and leaves the mess behind, to return around two. Back at the desk, she spends much of her afternoon on the telephone and the rest dictating notes to contract authors and jotting short replies to her personal friends. She will take the manila envelopes sent in by people she recognizes home where she can concentrate on them without interruption, protected by her answering machine. The material sent by outsiders, unknowns, will remain in a pile which will get larger and larger as the week progresses, until one day it will be taken to the desk of an assistant where it will sit until that assistant has it taken to the desk of another assistant on its way to oblivion.

Some of the first-class query letters will be looked at and one out of perhaps a thousand may be answered with a note of interest. After all, those on the inside at the magazine are going to get what space there is. Our Articles Editor is a writer herself. She took the job because it was a position where she could promote her own writing. She has no interest in promoting some stranger from Illinois. When there is a hole in the magazine, some space up for grabs, She will use that space to promote herself or a friend. Many editors write articles for their own magazines, using false names, so they can pad their income. If things run smoothly, the publisher may never know about these moonlighters. If he cares. Often when a good idea comes in through the mail, it will be xeroxed, and a form rejection slip sent to the contributor. The article then remains in a file for awhile. This file is farmed by those who work on the inside. It is easy to have a flunky type it into a word processor and hand over the disc. Then strange things begin to happen to this article. The location is changed, the names of some of the people and their activities are shifted around, and the emphasis is shifted here and there--behold, a new article! It runs under one of the editor's pseudonyms and no one is ever the wiser. Even if a writer *did* read all of the contents of every issue

of all the magazines he submitted to, he might not recognize his own piece in its remodelled format. And what if he did? He can't prove anything. He can write the same kind of angry letter he might write if his check never came, but what is he going to do? Fly to New York from his home state, hire a lawyer, spend thousands of dollars over what would be at best a few hundred dollars? In a time when we are all reading and watching many of the same events, it is only logical to realize that many of us who write will come up with similar ideas. Popular writers always write variations or improvisations on certain basic themes. How many articles will we see on Sex and Evangelism this year? Hundreds.

The intelligent freelancer knows he has a much better chance with local publications and small magazines or tabloids than with the majors where most of the work is assigned. **SLOPPY HOUSEKEEPING**, like all the majors deals in major themes and celebrities and celebrity writers. The contents are determined by a group of editors, all of whom are promoting themselves and their personal stable of writer contacts. The issues are usually thematic, and even if you did send in the perfect slant on their theme, they would want it written *by the authority in the field or by one of their names*. Of course, they would like to have that occasional blockbuster story from *out there*, but that is the exception in publishing, not the rule. When that moment comes up, be it Watergate or Irangate or Anyothergate, if *you* have the exclusive story, *they* will call you. Sending it through the mail would be futile since the moment would be long past before anyone saw the idea.

Lots of novice writers have the idea that creativity and originality are positive qualities they should shoot for, but the truth is quite different. If our Articles Editor *did* receive a truly original idea in the mail, she wouldn't recognize it. How could she? It would relate to nothing in her experience. Suppose it were a scientific breakthrough. How would she know it was anything new unless the authorities in that field said it was? And if it were the work of a single individual, those authorities wouldn't know it either. They would have to read the research and study it all out for themselves before they could comment one way or another, and they wouldn't do that because all of them would be working in their own areas and they wouldn't have the time or inclination to discontinue their own research in order to check out a strange new idea by a colleague. If he can prove his theory and get it accepted; in other words, if it sells, they will eventually accept it as a useful theory. If it doesn't sell, they will forget about it as they have forgotten about the thousands of other breakthroughs that have taken place over the years. A new idea is almost impossible to sell. Magazine editors claim to want creativity and originality, but that is the last thing they want. They have what they want as any reader knows. The magazine has the same format and content each month, the same company image, the one that pleases the corporate advertisers and keeps the money coming in and the copies going off the newsstands. If **COSMOPOLITAN** were to shift size and format and print a socially relevent or political event on the cover instead of the standard model in her absurd pose, the teenaged women who buy the magazine wouldn't buy it. They wouldn't recognize it. They would think this was some other magazine masquerading as **COSMO**. A **COSMOPOLITAN** in **MOTHER JONES**' drag. Every successful popular magazine is a consumer product and it has to look the same every month just like your box of Kix or your carton of Yogurt. It's a conservative form, one that depends on sameness in order to appeal to the repetition compulsion of the habitual buyer. To sell the popular magazines, you must be one of those people who can rewrite the same old malarky again and again for the same buyers. You must be glib, not creative. You must make the mundane *seem* original and fresh to the jaded editor who has to spend forty hours a week or more reading that drivel about relationships and political issues and designer drugs.

What is our Articles Editor reading as she sits in her $1100 a month hole in the wall in Manhattan? Stories about funny people who do funny things in small town America, about favorite cats and dogs, about local folk singers and drugstore celebrities who are going to New York or Hollywood and make the big time some day, about petty quarrels among neighbors. Every one thinks his or her story is worth an article or a story or a book and with the advent of cheap word processors more and more of these stories will be written by bored people with time on their hands and our Articles Editor will see her share of this tedious material, because that is her destiny.

The **WRITER'S MARKET** is a nice fantasy and I enjoy it. I am sure that someone out there is writing an article for some obscure Horse Lovers magazine right this minute, secure in the thought that he or she will get a by-line and a check and be launched on the way to the Phil Donahue Show. Well, it ain't me, babe.

It ain't me.

CLAY GEERDES

What a shame about Dori Seda! I thought her work was absolutely first rate. Though she's pretty much part of the *underground* generation agewise, I always thought of her as one of the best of the new talents. Bodé, Murphy, Sheridan, Hayes, Irons, Brand, and now Seda. I'm not old enough to have my culture heroes pass at such a rate.

SCOTT SEMANS

SAN DIEGO COMICON

This year's San Diego Comicon will take place August 4-7. I'll be attending on the weekend. Among the guests are Jules Feiffer and Mort Drucker. See you there. C. G.